

Monday, March 20, 2006

Mark Goodacre on Faith Based Scholarship

One of the blogfathers, [Mark Goodacre](#), has recently transitioned from the UK to the USA and now teaches at Duke. He has provided a substantial response to my questions.



(1) How would you describe the role of personal faith as it relates to biblical scholarship?

If it's scholarship that one is doing, my feeling is that personal faith has no part to play, at least not in the way that one's arguments are constructed or in the evidence one adduces. In other words, I am interested in scholarly arguments based on publicly available evidence, arguments that make sense to an audience of scholars and students who may not share one's own faith perspective. As soon as my arguments only work for those who share my faith perspective, at best my arguments become apologetics and at worse my arguments run the risk of becoming weak and unscholarly. As soon as I begin to use evidence that is not in the public arena and that cannot be submitted to scholarly scrutiny by everyone, I am not engaging in academic scholarship. I do not expect my students to use their personal faith in their essays; how much more would I not expect professional scholarship to bring personal faith into their work.

Lest that sounds unduly harsh, let me add that I understand that there are lots of different kinds of "biblical scholarship," and that there will be theological, spiritual, homiletical and devotional approaches in which of course Christian faith will have a part to play. But when one is engaging in historical, critical work on the New Testament, personal faith does not have a role to play. When studying the Synoptic Problem, for example, or the Historical Jesus, or Pauline chronology, it's publicly available evidence and publicly coherent arguments that count.

What are some presuppositions that you might have when it comes to the interpretative task?

I am assuming that this question is asking about faith-related presuppositions. If so, my key presupposition is that others may not share my own presuppositions, and therefore I should make sure that I am trying hard not to allow them to influence my scholarship. I would personally think it self-indulgent to engage in scholarship that aims to reinforce my own presuppositions. Rather, one should always be looking to test one's presuppositions when one engages in scholarship -- that's how one stays honest and interested.

What are some advantages and pitfalls of evangelical views concerning scripture?

I am not an expert on evangelical views concerning scripture, but I would say that one of the pitfalls is most clearly illustrated in the way that Robert Gundry was treated several years ago by the Evangelical Theology Society. As I understand it (and I am subject to correction here if I have got it wrong), he was expelled from the society because of his views on Matthean literary

creativity. What I find depressing about that is that the arguments are not engaged on their merits (and the merits are considerable) but on whether or not they fit with a creedal affirmation about what Scripture is thought to be like. I would find it hard myself to engage in scholarship where I was constantly worrying about how it measured up against a prior affirmation about inerrancy or the like.

But let me add that it is too easy to caricature different wings of scholarship, and to cast the discussion in terms of "evangelical" versus "liberal" or "secular". To throw just one complicating factor in, what about Catholics and Biblical scholarship? When John Dominic Crossan wants to choose an opponent who illustrates a conservative approach to the Biblical text, and especially the Passion Narrative, he famously engages not an evangelical scholar but a Catholic, Raymond Brown. And arguably the most strongly worded, single minded attack on the Jesus seminar is not written by an evangelical but by a Catholic, Luke Timothy Johnson.

And if I may, let me add too that the term "evangelical" has different connotations depending on the context its used in. Having lived in America for six months now, I am beginning to get a feel for how differently evangelicals are viewed over here than in the UK. There are so many evangelicals here, and the political dimension of the term is much stronger here. To be left wing and evangelical is not a contradiction in the UK. I know that it's not a contradiction here either (e.g. see the work of Jim Wallis), but it is the case that the term evangelical is often associated with those who are politically conservative.

But you asked also about the advantages of an evangelical view of scripture. I would say that one potential advantage is that the evangelical often gives the benefit of the doubt to a given Biblical writer, and that can enable a good case to be made for something that might otherwise not have been noticed. Or the scholar's evangelical perspective might help him/her to see something that another scholar might have missed. For example, Richard Bauckham's *Gospels for all Christians* is one of the most evangelical sounding titles to any academic book on the NT for many years, and no doubt on some level its thesis emerged from an evangelical agenda, yet it's also one of the most important books to emerge recently -- an important challenge to the sectarian community models. Or take Larry Hurtado's *Lord Jesus Christ*, in many respects a profoundly conservative book, but also a brilliant one.

(2) What are the advantages and pitfalls associated with a more "secular" brand of biblical scholarship?

In some ways, I feel as uncomfortable with the term "secular" scholarship as I do with terms like "evangelical" scholarship. I want to engage in responsible, critical scholarship of the Bible in which there are not specific "brands" that we join ourselves to. I don't know how I could be sure that I was keeping my scholarship honest if I were to ally myself to a particular brand, or a particular perspective on the evidence. I am not saying that those who do associate themselves with a particular perspective are not being honest; I just don't know how I could do it myself and make sense of what I was doing.

But let me at least attempt to answer your question head on. Among the advantages of a more "secular" perspective are that one might avoid a prior religious commitment influencing one's views of the evidence. As a Christian myself, I am conscious of wishing certain conclusions to

be true, and so aware of the danger that I might give more credence to poor arguments than a non-Christian might. I sometimes envy the atheist and the agnostic here in that they don't have to deal with the same baggage. But however much one might wish certain conclusions to be true, one should never arrange the argument and the evidence to support the desired-for conclusions -- and that is what I mean about honesty, or scholarly integrity. If you know that you are predisposed to think a certain way, that's all the more reason to test yourself, and to make sure that your faith has not become an excuse for sloppy thinking.

I see the pitfalls most clearly when I look at something like Gerd Lüdemann's Christmas 2005 press release. I feel that Gerd, whose scholarship I greatly admire, sometimes allows his secular, humanist perspective to morph into a kind of polemic that fails to represent traditional, Christian perspectives and arguments accurately. Thus, last Christmas when I read his press release, its harsh, polemical tone encouraged me to respond in spite of the fact that I agreed with a lot of the scholarly substance behind it. I think that there is sometimes a missionary zeal about that kind of secular perspective that runs the risk of becoming unscholarly. I tend to think of that as an equal danger to an uncritical conservative perspective and it illustrates the importance of the scholarly task as a communal task, a democratic discipline, in which -- to repeat -- the key things are publicly available evidence and publicly coherent arguments.

What does the church have to do with the academy and vice versa?

I am lucky in that I teach in a department of Religion in an American university in which there is no link with the Church. I think that gives a kind of freedom that I don't think I would have if I were teaching in the Divinity School here, where I would undoubtedly be more conscious of the interaction between church and academy. I really value the freedom that one has teaching in the American liberal arts set up, but it's a freedom that comes with responsibility, and I take that responsibility seriously.

What are the some possible avenues of fruitful dialogue between "faith-based" and "secular" approaches in biblical scholarship?

My problem with this kind of question is that I don't like the terms, or the idea that there are these camps that might benefit from engaging in "dialogue", as if one always knows where one's scholarship is going to fit in, or how one will find one's views getting aligned. I would hope that the majority of Biblical scholars would not see themselves as fitting into either a "faith-based" or "secular" approach. They see themselves as attempting to do good scholarship which they submit to their peers for review, and which they review in line with how strong the arguments are, and not in line with whether they fit a "faith-based" or "secular" approach.

(3) Who would you considered to be stellar examples of evangelical scholarship? Who are some of the best examples of mainstream critical scholars?

I am a bit wary about the terminology, and hope that it does not imply that "evangelical" and "mainstream critical" are opposed. Some of the "mainstream" are in fact evangelicals, no? If I were to pick out my favorite evangelical scholar, I would say Richard Bauckham, who is always worth reading. But then let me add that the reason that he's great is not because he's evangelical. Indeed, who cares whether he is evangelical or not? The key thing is the strength of his

scholarship, the clarity of his argument and his ability to think in creative, original ways.

The two scholars who have most influenced me, though, are without any doubt Michael Goulder and E. P. Sanders. My guess is that Michael, I am sorry to say, will only be fully appreciated after his death. I suppose that he is a case in point for this discussion because he has been ignored or dismissed by many evangelicals, and to the detriment of their scholarship, and often the reason that he has been ignored or dismissed is because of the non-conservative friendly nature of some of his writing, not because of the quality of his arguments. Ed is appreciated much more widely, of course, but even there I am consistently surprised to see misreading, misunderstandings and ignorance of Sanders' writings.

(4) Any additional thoughts on this subject?

I appreciate your taking the initiative in asking these interesting questions, and I am honored that you would consider my opinion worth listening to.